

The *Gesta Romanorum*: A *Sammelbecken* of Ancient Wisdom and Didactic Literature and a Medieval ‘Bestseller’ Revisited

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Introduction

Sometimes the most popular or important texts from the past are simply unknown to most of us today and tend to be passed over even by scholars. Literary documents of greatest influence at a specific time can easily escape the radar screen of modern researchers and other readers because, paradoxically, they were so obvious for everyone then and had been such common household items in the past; yet, they seem to have lost their appeal since then and have curiously disappeared into the arcana of our libraries.¹ Religiously influenced texts often addressed much larger audiences than esoteric secular ones, and the pre-modern world witnessed the rise of a number of true ‘bestsellers’ already then, however unnoticed they may be by the present generation.² Those of us working in Middle High German, Middle English, Old French or Medieval Spanish Literature could be quite familiar with the *Gesta Romanorum* for a number of different reasons, but because they had been composed in Latin and are determined by a strong religious impetus, most scholars tend to mention them only in passing. Ignorance, however, does not mean that we can

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¹ See the contributions to *Vergessene Texte des Mittelalters*, eds Nathanael Busch and Björn Reich (Stuttgart: Hirzel, 2014). As the editors emphasize, the number of medieval texts commonly studied in university classrooms is shockingly small compared to the actual number of texts composed in the Middle Ages.

² David Viñas Piquer, *El enigma best-seller: Fenómenos extraños en el campo literario* (Barcelona: Ariel, 2009); see now the contributions to *Bestseller – gestern und heute: Ein Blick vom Rand zum Zentrum der Literaturwissenschaft / Bestseller – Yesterday and Today: A Look from the Margin to the Center of Literary Studies*, eds Albrecht Classen and Eva Parra Membrives (Tübingen: Narr, 2016).

simply disregard such major literary accomplishments, especially if we want to gain a fuller understanding of the Middle Ages. The purpose of this article is to return our focus to the large collection of fables, legendary narratives, novellas, and fairy tales that comprises the *Gesta Romanorum*. This fourteenth-century anthology was originally composed either in southern Germany or in England, and consists of ca. 250 tales in total or, more conservatively, 181 narratives, since the rest seem to be lacking in authenticity, being contained only in later manuscripts.

The *Gesta* have survived in a large number of manuscripts from the Middle Ages, the oldest of which appears to be the Innsbruck Ms. Cod. Lat. 310 from 1342, and then they were translated into many various vernaculars.³ As such, they inspired numerous subsequent poetic renderings and can thus be identified both as one of the greatest medieval bestsellers and one of the most significant literary sources for other poets, drawing itself from many different traditions including Persian, Arabic, Greek, and Roman antiquity, folklore, the Old and the New Testament, the *Vitae Patrum*, the *Legenda aureum* by Jacob Voragine, or Petrus Alfonsi's *Disciplina clericalis*, and the entire collection of the *Historia septem sapientium*.⁴ As an anthology, this work thus proves to be a most significant *Sammelbecken* (collection basin) of many different traditions, which by itself exerted a tremendous influence on poets of subsequent centuries. The *Gesta* proved to be particularly popular among preachers who happily incorporated individual tales into their sermons. Many of the tales contained in the *Gesta* are of a moralistic, didactic nature and intend

³ Walter Röll, 'Zur Überlieferungsgeschichte der *Gesta Romanorum*', *Mittelaltinisches Jahrbuch*, vol. 21 (1986), pp. 208-229; Walter Röll, 'Nachlese zur Überlieferung der *Gesta Romanorum*', *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur*, vol. 121 (1999), pp. 103-108. See also the extensive analysis of Gabriela Kompatscher, *Die Gesta-Romanorum-Handschriften der Universitätsbibliothek Innsbruck Cod. 667, Cod. 509 und Cod. 433: ihre Beziehungen zueinander und zu den anderen Gesta-Romanorum-Handschriften der Universitätsbibliothek Innsbruck* (Innsbruck: Wagner, 1997).

⁴ For the large frame of intracultural exchanges between East and West, see now the contributions to *D'Orient en Occident: Les recueils de fables enchâssées avant les Mille et une Nuits de Galland (Barlaam et Josaphat, Calila et Dimna, Disciplina Clericalis, Roman des Sept Sages*, eds Marion Uhlig and Yasmina Foehr-Janssens (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014); as to the status of bestsellers in the Middle Ages, see Albrecht Classen, 'Bestsellers in the European Middle Ages? An Examination of Some of the Most Popular Books in the Premodern Era. With Reflections on Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*', in *Bestseller – Yesterday and Today*, pp. 83-103.

to convey universal wisdom to the respectively new audiences.⁵ The bipartite structure of most tales, consisting first of the narrative itself, then of the moralization, or epimythion, made it especially convenient for all users to choose for themselves either to limit their interest to the primary account or to accept the religious interpretation as the primary purpose.

Here I will try to indicate how and why this collection deserves our respect until today because of the high literary quality and considerable structural complexities. Studying the *Gesta* makes it possible to gain deep insights into medieval mentality, ethical and moral concepts, and religious ideals, and to comprehend how much ancient, classical literature was still familiar in the fourteenth century or not. It also represents a central key to popular entertainment dominant in the later Middle Ages because here we can identify some of the central topics publicly discussed both within the Church and among the lay audience.

Rediscovering the *Gesta Romanorum* as a Key Text in the Middle Ages and Beyond

Specialists such as Udo Wawrzyniak have already discussed the *Gesta Romanorum* at greater length and from an anthropological perspective.⁶ According to him, the *Gesta* were composed either in England or Southern Germany and served moralizing purposes, hence appealed mostly to priests and other authority figures. He discusses the vernacular manuscript tradition in both countries and highlights that the *Gesta* were adopted in Romance countries only very late, with the first French translation appearing only as late as 1521. Despite the title, which reflects the extent to

⁵ Fritz Wagner, 'Gesta Romanorum', *Lexikon des Mittelalter*, vol. IV, (Munich and Zürich: Artemis Verlag, 1989), col. 1408-09. Volker Mertens wrote the section on the *Gesta* in German literature (1409-10), and Hans Sauer was responsible for the *Gesta* in English literature (1410). Surprisingly, the *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, ed. Joseph R. Strayer, does not contain any reference to the *Gesta* (see vol. 5 [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985]). The same applies to the *Encyclopedia of the Medieval World*, ed. Edward D. English (New York: Facts on File, 2005); *Encyclopedia of the Middle Ages*, eds Andre Vauchez, Barrie Dobson and Michael Lapidge, trans. Adrian Walford (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2000); *The Oxford Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, ed. Robert E. Bjork (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); and to the *Handbook of Medieval Culture: Fundamental Aspects and Conditions of the European Middle Ages*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2015), though, of course, the purpose of the *Handbook* is not at all to address all major texts from the Middle Ages or to discuss literary genres.

⁶ Udo Wawrzyniak, 'Gesta Romanorum', in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*, ed. Rolf Wilhelm Brednich, vol. 5 (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1987), pp. 1201-1212.

which Roman antiquity served as a basis for many of the tales, the range of themes, sources, and literary genres proves to be expansive, including natural sciences, pagan-antique myths, the Old Testament, Christian legendary narratives, fable literature, jest narratives, descriptions of events in public life, and spiritual allegories.

Many of the highly popular narrative traditions from the late Middle Ages and well beyond were obviously based on the material contained in the *Gesta*. Considering, for example, the antique novel *Apollonius of Tyre* (second or third century), which is also contained in this collection, we can recognize the critical function of the *Gesta* as the juncture and catalyst in and for a vast dissemination process in pre-modern literature, serving as a gateway for ancient literature on its way throughout the Middle Ages and into the early modern age. The same applies to the account of Pope Gregory and his sinful origin as the product of incest, who then innocently had committed the same crime with his mother, which is contained here in the *Gesta* as well ("Of the wonders of God's providence and the rise of Pope Gregory," Tale 81), whereas the most influential earlier version was composed by the Middle High German poet Hartmann von Aue in his *Gregorius* (ca. 1180), which in turn had been based on an Old French archetype.⁷

With the rise of Humanism and the Protestant Reformation, however, the influence of the *Gesta* began to fade, although we can still find direct links between this compilation and English poets such as John Gower and William Shakespeare, and German poets such as Hans Sachs. Modern German writers from the eighteenth through the twentieth centuries such as Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Hugo von Hoffmannsthal, Werner Bergengruen, Thomas Mann, and Hermann Hesse recognized the great value of the *Gesta* once again and utilized a number of examples or

⁷ Ella Bourne, 'Classical Elements in the *Gesta Romanorum*', in *Vassar Mediaeval Studies*, ed. Christabel Forsythe Fiske (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1923), pp. 345-76; Johannes Schneider, 'Das Fortleben der römischen Kaiser in den *Gesta Romanorum*', *Klio*, vol. 52 (1970), pp. 395-409; Diane Speed, 'Middle English Romance and the *Gesta Romanorum*', in *Tradition and Transformation in Medieval Romance*, ed. Rosalind Field (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999), pp. 45-56; see also Rebecca Krug, 'Shakespeare's Medieval Morality: *The Merchant of Venice* and the *Gesta Romanorum*', in *Shakespeare and the Middle Ages*, eds Curtis Perry and John Watkins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 241-62. For Hartmann, see *Arthurian Romances, Tales, and Lyric Poetry: The Complete Works of Hartmann von Aue*, trans. and commentary by Frank Tobin, Kim Vivian, and Richard H. Lawson (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), pp. 165-214.

published, as in the case of Hesse, a selected edition of translated texts (1914; 2nd ed. 1920).⁸ However, despite a number of isolated efforts to gain a better understanding of the *Gesta* in their structural, thematic, allegorical, moral, and narratological features,⁹ and apart from a few very specialized investigations,¹⁰ there are not many comprehensive discussions of this famous and highly influential collection of tales, apart from the excellent introduction to the new translation by Nigel Harris (2016).¹¹

Until very recently we depended on the old edition by Hermann Oesterley (1872), and the English translation by Charles Swan (1876),¹² but now Christopher Stace has presented us with a new translation (2016) that offers new opportunities for a critical reading because he stays much closer to the original, does not adapt some of the texts to fit modern moralistic sentiments, and helps us significantly to gain a good grasp of this famous anthology. The availability of this translation also promises that the *Gesta* will finally come out of the shadow of extensive neglect and can be recognized as what they truly are, a most influential, meaningful, entertaining, and didactically uplifting collection of many different tales, written for a Christian audience, but certainly combining many older and

⁸ Wawrzyniak, 'Gesta Romanorum', offers an extensive list of motifs and a very detailed bibliography; see also Udo Gerdes, 'Gesta Romanorum', in *Die deutsche Literatur des Mittelalters: Verfasserlexikon*, ed. Kurt Ruh et al. vol. 3.1 (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1980), pp. 25-34. He emphasizes that the compiler most probably drew from a whole library of older anthologies or collections. As he notes, "Die Offenheit der Geschichtenreihe macht es möglich, allenthalben Verbindungen mit ähnlichen Texten einzugehen; daraus resultiert als ein wesentliches Merkmal der 'GR' die Mannigfaltigkeit der Textformen in der Überlieferung" (pp. 27-28; The openness of the narrative sequences makes it possible to enter everywhere connections with similar texts; from this resulted, which is a crucial characteristic of the *GR*, the multiplicity of text forms in the history of reception). See the detailed identification of relevant materials and motifs as listed by Hermann Oesterley, ed. *Gesta Romanorum* (Hildesheim and New York: Georg Olms, 1963[1872]), pp. 714-49.

⁹ See, above all, Brigitte Weiske, *Gesta Romanorum*, 2 vols (Tübingen: Ma Niemeyer, 1992).

¹⁰ See, for example, Udo Friedrich, 'Zur Verdinglichung der Werte in den Gesta Romanorum', in *Dingkulturen: Objekte in Literatur, Kunst und Gesellschaft der Vormoderne*, eds Anna Mühlherr, Heike Sahm, Monika Schausten, and Bruno Quast (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2016), pp. 249-66.

¹¹ Nigel Harris, 'Introduction', *Gesta Romanorum*, trans. Christopher Stace (2016), see note 13 below; see also Albrecht Classen, 'The *Gesta Romanorum* in Light of Hartmann von Aue's *Gregorius* and Heinrich Kaufringer's Verse Narratives: Transcultural and Translinguistic Exchanges from the Early Middle Ages and to the Early Modern Ages', to appear in *The Comparatist*.

¹² *Gesta Romanorum: or Entertaining Moral Stories*, trans. Charles Swan, rev. and commentary by Wynnard Hooper (1876; New York: Dover, 1959).

non-Christian traditions.¹³ Oesterley's edition has proved to be very solid until today, and it is unlikely in the face of the large number of extant manuscripts that we could expect new efforts in that regard, but for the subsequent analysis I have drawn mostly from Stace, while regularly comparing his translation with the Latin origin in Oesterley.

Morality, Ethics, Religion and Medieval Mentality

What would make the *Gesta* such a relevant literary document from the later Middle Ages, apart from the fact that it enjoyed enormous popularity all over Europe? Also, where do the reasons for this popularity rest? Why was this collection so pervasive until the early sixteenth century, but then faded away and quickly disappeared from public view? Approaching these challenges from a scholarly perspective, we know that historians can draw from it important insights into reading habits, cultural exchanges, the vast dissemination of Latin manuscripts, the translation process,¹⁴ and into the connection between literary texts and sermons throughout the late Middle Ages. Religious scholars can quickly gain a comprehensive overview of the general concerns, worries, troubles, spiritual problems, concepts of sinfulness, and the role of the Church as reflected in this anthology. Literary scholars are faced with the great opportunity to examine the long-term impact which ancient biblical and many other traditions had on the development of the huge genre of short verse or prose narratives, such as Boccaccio's *Decameron* (ca. 1351), Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1400), Heinrich Kaufringer's tales (ca. 1400), and those in the *Cent Nouvelles Nouvelles* (ca. 1460). In other words, we are best advised to approach the *Gesta* from an interdisciplinary perspective and view it, above all, through the lens of the history of mentality, reflecting social, ethical, religious, and spiritual concerns.¹⁵ The author obviously drew from a wealth of different sources, and utilized them for the purpose of religious

¹³ Christopher Stace (trans.), *Gesta Romanorum: A New Translation*, with an introduction by Nigel Harris (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016). However, Stace entirely relies on Oesterley's edition, and Harris's introduction summarizes our basic knowledge without pursuing the ambitious goal of offering new readings and insights regarding sources or the influence by the *Gesta* on later literature.

¹⁴ For the medieval Czech translation, for instance, see *Staroceská gesta romanorum*, ed. Jan V. Novák (Prague: Česká Akademie Cisare Františka Josefa pro Vedy, Slovesnost a Umení, 1895). As I have pointed out already, there were many translations into other late medieval vernaculars.

¹⁵ Rolf Sprandel, 'Die *Gesta Romanorum* als Quelle der spätmittelalterlichen Mentalitätsgeschichte', *Saeculum*, vol. 33 (1982), pp. 312-22.

instruction. In that process, however, he opened up many channels of literary communication insofar as the readers/listeners had numerous opportunities simply to ignore the moralization and to enjoy the tales all by themselves.

The first major step in the renewed effort to grasp the essential components and messages contained in the *Gesta* will be to identify the range of themes and topics covered in this collection. This will then lead to the realization of the intentions the author pursued, what issues he (taking this presumption of gender) regarded as important for the public, and how he proceeded in practical terms. Subsequently, I will examine a selection of tales regarding their narrative strategies and the original poet's intentions, which obviously transpired in the course of time and made them employable by and attractive for later writers. Finally, I will evaluate the selection of themes and compositional technique of the *Gesta* in order to identify the specific reasons for their enormous popularity well into the sixteenth century.

Considering that we are facing one hundred and eighty-one tales as the most authentic core of the original tales contained in the *Gesta Romanorum*, it might be nearly impossible to come to terms with this mass of narrative material. But if we distinguish more between the narrative material itself and the moralization, we can easily observe how much the *Gesta* served to alert the audience to the many different vices, sins, and shortcomings people always tend to be guilty of. Beginning with general values, the stories address aspects such as justice, fidelity, reason, gentleness, and the perfect life. This is quickly matched by stories that address vainglory, forgetfulness, pride, guile and conspiracy, fear, crime, boastfulness, envy, the mortal sins, and so forth. From there the narratives turn to issues such as remembrance of death, how to lead a perfect life, the role of confession, avarice, the temptation of the material existence endangering the soul's well-being, and so forth. This is then matched by tales dealing with steadfastness, proclamations of truth, and the death of the ungrateful. We learn about the constancy of mutual love, the wonders of God's providence, measures to safeguard one's soul in the afterlife, the need to remember God's goodness, Christ's Passion for humanity, the freedom of choice (free will), and the properties of the soul. Further down the line, the narrator reviews the importance of telling the truth, the danger of avarice, the beauty of devoted love, the effectiveness of prayer, and the dangers of sloth, among the other Seven Deadly Sins.

There are stories addressing the ways even lepers can regain their health through truly-felt repentance, the dangers of transgression, the power of the devil to deceive people through his false promises, the role of God as the ultimate physician, the challenges the human soul faces all the time, the presence of deceit and cunning, women's untrustworthiness and their power to seduce men, the temptation of worldly riches, true friendship, the value of wisdom, the impact of envy, the power of Christ, fear of the last judgment, and divine salvation. But there are also narratives concerning evil rulers and the necessity to criticize them for their wrong behavior, the cause for the destruction of Troy, immortality, vineyards, gratefulness, the game of chess, faithfulness, the laws of nature, gluttony and drunkenness, fidelity, and finally adultery. Indeed, the *Gesta* were a *Sammelbecken*, almost a hodgepodge of many different themes, topics, concerns, values, and ideals, reflecting on basic fears, desires, hope, and trust in God.

In sum, it would not be difficult to determine the specific reasons why the *Gesta* appealed to such a vast audience because virtually everyone could find a literary example for personal concerns. The author provided a wealth of teaching lessons, and also entertained his listeners/readers with a wide range of narrative material. In a way, he perfectly translated the Horatian principle of *delectare et prodesse* and thus managed to appeal to many different interests both within the Church and in lay society. Whether these tales were originally composed by a member of the Franciscan Order, which was particularly bent on preaching to the masses, or by another member of the clergy, this collection of tales certainly addresses the wide gamut of human frailty, sinfulness, weakness, but then also virtues and spirituality. Morality, ethics, and philosophy nicely combine with history and literature, so it comes as little surprise that subsequent poets such as Boccaccio and Chaucer responded so energetically to the *Gesta*.

Alternative Perspectives

There are, however, numerous exceptions to the rule, such as when we turn to Tale 166, which represents a kind of narrative instruction on how to play chess. The usual separate moralization is missing; whereas the technical aspects regarding the board figures and the rules by which they can move dominate the entire account. Nevertheless, within the discussion itself the author injects his remarks, commenting on the knights, for instance: "we

are all knights and must fight against the devil on the battlefield of this world, and defend our king, in other words our soul.”¹⁶ Regarding the commoners we learn: “these Commoners symbolize people of different rank and of either sex, among whom kings, mighty nobles and other aristocrats are set in order to rule them and make them perfect,” and as to the Queen we learn that she “symbolizes our soul, which by virtue of our good works will be crowned queen in heaven.”¹⁷ So, after all, as is typical throughout, the narrator connects the individual statements to specific passages in the Bible and thus creates the necessary textual entrelacement relevant especially for popular preachers.

On the one hand this outline of the rules for playing chess seems to be primarily instructional, but on the other, as is typical of the entire *Gesta*, it serves spiritual and religious purposes. Remarkably, the moral exhortations are not kept separately from the main body of the text; instead here they interweave the entire narrative framework, which thus guarantees that the audience cannot get side-tracked and limit its interest to the practical information.¹⁸ In other words, for the primary author there is always a more or less hidden agenda, or we can recognize a globally different intention behind the compilation insofar as the story-telling serves, above all, as moral and religious teachings. Nevertheless, we still observe how much the game of chess was apparently popular enough to act as a metaphor of human life. The explanations of how the individual figures were to move might not be precise enough, or not even accurate, but within the context of a sermon the explanation of the rules offered the desired opportunity to connect that game with life in its spiritual dimensions. This would not be an unusual operation for medieval poets, who regularly invested their narratives with various layers of meaning, including the historiographical, allegorical, and anagogical.¹⁹ In other words, here we recognize most clearly some of the fundamental concepts in medieval life emphasizing the spiritual dimension of all physical existence.

¹⁶ Stace, *Gesta Romanorum*, p. 438.

¹⁷ Stace, *Gesta Romanorum*, p. 439.

¹⁸ As to the role of chess in the Middle Ages, see the contributions to *Chess in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age: A Fundamental Thought Paradigm of the Premodern World*, ed. Daniel E. O’Sullivan (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2012).

¹⁹ Henri de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale: les quatre sens de l’écriture*, 4 vols (Paris: Aubier, 1959-1961).

Classical Antiquity and the *Gesta Romanorum*

Many times, however, the author forced a moral reading on the original tales, such as in the case “Of the cause of the destruction of Troy” (Tale 156), which briefly summarizes the history of Achilles and Ulysses according to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Ulysses knows how to expose Achilles’s true gender identity by presenting him, who is hiding in the disguise of a woman’s outfit, both with jewels and arms: “Achilles seized a spear and brandished it, and so the truth was revealed.”²⁰ While this narrative summarizes the key components as contained in Ovid’s account, the moralization takes a very different direction: “Paris signifies the devil, Helen the soul or the whole of humankind in the clutches of the devil; Troy signifies hell, Ulysses Christ, Achilles the Holy Spirit; the ship laden with merchandise is the Blessed Virgin Mary adorned with virtues.”²¹ In fact, the poet radically transforms the classical-antique account and makes Troy into hell and Ulysses to Christ. But in that process a major problem occurred within the text because according to the prophecy in Ovid’s version Troy would be conquered only after Achilles’s death. The interpreter suddenly identifies Ulysses as the one who died, which thus crushed the power of hell, while the reference to Achilles is lost out of sight. Considering the extensive notoriety of the war between the Greeks and the Trojans, especially in the Middle Ages, it makes good sense that here in the *Gesta* we also learn about it, although it is then entirely translated into a Christian teaching.²²

In this regard it is not surprising that a version of the equally popular antique novel *Apollonius of Tyre* also figures in the *Gesta Romanorum* (Tale 153).²³ Surprisingly, however, in this case the compiler

²⁰ Stace, *Gesta Romanorum*, p. 416.

²¹ Stace, *Gesta Romanorum*, p. 416.

²² This has been studied already from many different perspectives; see, for instance, Karin Schneider, *Der Trojanische Krieg im späten Mittelalter: Deutsche Trojaromane des 15. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 1968); Kathleen Callen King, *Achilles: Paradigms of the War Hero from Homer to the Middle Ages* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987); Sylvia Federico, *New Troy: Fantasies of Empire in the Late Middle Ages*. *Medieval Cultures*, 36 (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

²³ For an excellent critical study, edition, and translation into English, see Elizabeth Archibald, *Apollonius of Tyre: Medieval and Renaissance Themes and Variations* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1991). Regarding the version in the *Gesta*, see Brigitte Weiske, ‘Die Apollonius-Version der *Gesta Romanorum*’, in *Positionen des Romans im späten Mittelalter*, eds Walter Haug and Burghart Wachinger (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1991), pp. 116-22.

entirely neglected the opportunity to offer a religious reading and rendered the text rather closely to the original without any significant intervention on his part. Maybe the closure with Apollonius achieving a nearly holy status, “[w]hen he died he went straight to everlasting life,”²⁴ might have been sufficient for him, or the details of the novel proved to be overwhelming, preventing him from adopting the text for his usual didacticism. Whatever the case might have been, here we face an extraordinary situation within the entire anthology, since the ‘author’ apparently abandoned his usual directive position and allowed this ancient novel to stand on its own.

Tale versus Moralization

Sometimes it proves rather difficult to comprehend the connections between the narrative account and the moralization, such as in the case of “Of boastfulness” (Tale 33). Here a man named Peratinus publicly complains about a special tree in his garden that has had a deep impact on his life: “My first wife hanged herself on it, then my second, and then my third. It has caused me endless grief.”²⁵ A neighbor called Arrius rejects the negative evaluation of that tree and demands three cuttings from the tree for his neighbors “so that each of them can have a tree for his wife to hang herself on.”²⁶ Are we to take this as an expression of extreme misogyny? This would conform to many contemporary statements by deeply unhappy husbands who remark how delighted they would be if their wives were dead.²⁷ However, as the subsequent moralization informs us, the intention here proves to be entirely different since the ominous tree suddenly turns out to be the holy cross, and the three wives who committed suicide represent “pride of life, concupiscence of the flesh and concupiscence of the eyes.”²⁸ This is subsequently expanded: “Avarice hangs herself with

²⁴ Stace, *Gesta Romanorum*, p. 408.

²⁵ Stace, *Gesta Romanorum*, p. 94.

²⁶ Stace, *Gesta Romanorum*, p. 94.

²⁷ Katharina M. Wilson and Elizabeth M. Makowski, *Wykked Wyves and the Woes of Marriage: Misogamous Literature from Juvenal to Chaucer* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990). There are many parallel examples in medieval literature depicting wives as vile and evil characters, sometimes presented with tongue-in-cheek, but often rather serious and rabidly brutal, such as in Der Stricker’s verse narrative ‘Der Gevatterin Rat’, in Der Stricker, *Verserzählungen*, vol. I, ed. Hanns Fischer (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1967), no. VII, pp. 66-91. There the husband has to eat crow at the end, and his misogamy is strongly deconstructed.

²⁸ Stace, *Gesta Romanorum*, p. 94.

the rope of alms, pride with the rope of humility, pleasure hangs herself with the rope of fasting and chastity.”

It might be difficult for us today to follow this radical switch in interpretation. However, if we consider, for comparison's sake, mystical accounts such as the virtually contemporary *Christus und die minnende Seele* (early fourteenth century), where the mystical bride and Christ hurt each other badly, execute the respective other, and thus express the new experience of *unio mystica*, the account in the *Gesta* suddenly makes sense.²⁹ Those three wives are identified as the vices of pleasure, avarice, and pride, and thus, by hanging themselves, they disappear from the sinner's life, who dedicates himself to Christ only, who is nailed to the tree in the garden. Altogether, this tale thus intends to instruct people about the right and the wrong ways and how good instruction, as in this tale, can lead to the soul's salvation. For the preacher, the inconsistency between the narrative and the interpretation did not matter, especially because the premise in the tale itself does not seem to have been convincing: a man's wives commit suicide one by one, all hanging themselves from a tree in the garden.

A very different situation occurs in “Of unjust administrators” (Tale 127), which appears to be closely modeled on a tale by Aesop. Here the Emperor Tiberius Caesar is asked why he kept his provincial governors for such a long time, although, as the narrative implies, they were corrupt and exploited the people. The emperor answers by drawing on a parable, referring to a sick man covered by ulcers and flies. When he had tried to relieve his pain by chasing away the flies, the latter had criticized him, stating: “‘the bite of a starving fly is twice as painful as that one that is full’.”³⁰ The flies that had already sucked of his blood are hence compared to the governors who had gained already most of the riches that they wanted to acquire through their post; once new administrators were to assume such a post, they would work double as hard to abuse their office and enrich themselves: “‘new and empty-handed governors are more likely to abandon justice and oppress their subjects with unfair taxes and

²⁹ Hildegard Elisabeth Keller, *My Secret is Mine: Studies on Religion and Eros in the German Middle Ages* (Leuven: Peeters, 2000); Amy Gebauer, ‘*Christus und die minnende Seele*’: *An Analysis of Circulation, Text, and Iconography* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2010).

³⁰ Stace, *Gesta Romanorum*, p. 127.

burdens'.³¹ For the author, no further comments seemed necessary, but instead of pursuing a religious teaching, as is normally the case, here the story stands by itself and exposes, through the comments by the emperor, the problem of wide-spread corruption and exploitation by the powerful administrators.

Intriguingly, we learn more often than not of political criticism targeting a ruler, especially if he proves to be a tyrant. In "On the just consequence of evil" (Tale 48), for instance, also drawn from a classical source, though a specific text cannot be firmly determined, a bronze worker offers a large figure of a bull to the tyrant Phalaris, which could serve as a torture instrument of a unique kind. The miserable people condemned to die would be locked inside and then slow burned to death. Because of the design of the sculpture, the screams would not sound human, but like those of a bull. Curiously, however, the tyrant immediately decides to punish the sculptor and have him experience the horrible death himself. Even though the tyrant accepts that he is regarded as a cruel ruler, he charges the craftsman for being even worse than him because he came up with the idea for this torture instrument. In the moralization we receive hardly any religious instruction; instead the narrator stays on the same level and comments: "often such people, who oppress others, suffer the same or a greater punishment and end their days badly."³² Only in the last lines are we finally told that the tale serves as a model for how quickly the mighty and powerful will fall according to the Psalmist. The notion of the workings by Fortuna, as fundamentally taught by the Roman philosopher Boethius in his famous treatise *De consolazione philosophiae* might have served as a basis for the *Gesta* author, although he pursues, after all, a strongly religious message.

When there is a moralization, we might take it closely into consideration, but we are not necessarily required to do so since the story can stand on its own. In "Of forgetfulness" (Tale 10), Emperor Vespasian is said to have no children until one day he follows his councillors' advice and marries a young woman in a distant land. But this does not give him the desired happiness although she bears him a son, because his wife refuses to give him permission to travel back home, always threatening him with committing suicide if he were to leave her, even if only for a short

³¹ Stace, *Gesta Romanorum*, p. 127.

³² Stace, *Gesta Romanorum*, p. 123.

time. In order to solve his issue, Vespasian has two rings made, one with the engraving of 'Forgetfulness', the other with the engraving 'Memory'. The former he hands to his wife, the latter he puts on his own finger, whereupon she loses her love for him, whereas he can freely return home never to return to her, "and there ended his days in peace."³³ Obviously, the narrator emphasizes through this allegorical tale the deep tension between these two mental approaches, with memory as the key instrument to help the individual steer through life with full knowledge of one's origin and identity. Because of memory, we are grounded in our own culture, society, and heritage, whereas forgetfulness leads the individual astray like a rudderless ship, making him mindless.

In other words, the short narrative carries a profound philosophical message regarding the relationship between self, the will, and others. This is then taken into a religious direction through the subsequent moralization according to which the emperor represents the human soul which cannot live without returning home, that is, to God in heaven. The wife represents the flesh, the material conditions that hold the soul back from its true goal. As for the two rings, the narrator identifies memory and forgetfulness with religious rituals, memory being prayer and forgetfulness being fasting "because it restrains the flesh and shuns it, lest it impede the use of reason and good works, which are the way to God."³⁴ For a medieval preacher, such an interpretation might have worked well for a sermon, but a close analysis indicates a certain contradiction within the tale. The wife demanded too much of Vespasian and endangered his spiritual and personal happiness by remembering his duty to her as a husband. Yet, the wife emerges as a dangerous temptation for her husband insofar as she tries to control him by means of extortion (threat of suicide). However, fasting, a positive activity for a good Christian preparing the body for a religious ceremony, constitutes a very different concept than the one employed by the interpreter of the tale: "Let us strive therefore to keep these rings with us so that we may be found worthy to attain to life everlasting."³⁵ In all likelihood the medieval author did not even perceive this contradiction and felt completely free, as a preacher, to utilize this tale for his own purposes. However, this does not diminish its powerful reflection on the opposing

³³ Stace, *Gesta Romanorum*, p. 26

³⁴ Stace, *Gesta Romanorum*, p. 27.

³⁵ Stace, *Gesta Romanorum*, p. 27.

forces of memory and forgetfulness, since they constitute the two extremes of knowing identity and losing one's identity.

Political Criticism

The astounding wealth of themes and topics covered in the *Gesta* certainly contributed to their extensive popularity; there was simply something to discover in them for everyone, whether plain moral and ethical instructions, religious teachings, philosophical insights, or political messages. The latter finds an intriguing example in the tale "Of an exemplary life" (Tale 16) in which we are presented with the teachings for any ruler who wants to avoid being a dictator or a tyrant, but aims at being a benevolent king. A Roman emperor has a splendid palace built for himself, when an ancient sarcophagus covered with enigmatic inscriptions is discovered in the grounds. The emperor requests the governors of his empire interpret the sayings, and thus is quickly told what an ideal ruler should observe. According to the advice given by a previous ruler, he should always try to give wise judgment, "correcting others, and subjecting myself to the dictates of reason."³⁶ He is supposed to award his soldiers by giving them everything they need, to provide food for the poor, to exert justice, showing compassion for the needy and paying the workers the salary they deserve. All servants should receive their appropriate rewards, and the emperor should be kind to all. Maybe most importantly, "have a hand ready to bestow gifts, a hand to protect and a hand to punish."³⁷ As a ruler, he is supposed to steer the government with a firm hand, but to help those in need and give proper judgment. Moreover, he needs to observe reason, to put aside all folly, and to resist the temptation of the flesh.

Of course, the narrator then turns it all into the usual moralization, with the emperor symbolizing the collective of Christians, and all the recommendations as pertaining to religious messages. Here, "I have" stands for "'the grace of baptism, and through the virtues God gave me in baptism, I became a soldier of Christ, when I had been a slave of the devil'."³⁸ Most specifically, as the last interpretation indicates, the moralization appeals to a member of the Church: "I have given my assent,

³⁶ Stace, *Gesta Romanorum*, p. 45.

³⁷ Stace, *Gesta Romanorum*, p. 45.

³⁸ Stace, *Gesta Romanorum*, p. 46.

and subjected all my will to the will of my prelate for the love of God.”³⁹ While the tale itself reflects a political discourse, the moralization pursues a religious discourse; both run parallel to each other, and one can read either one by itself or in interaction with each other, although the latter approach might have been difficult. What matters most, however, is not which part plays the more powerful role, but the presence of both narratives that seem so closely correlated with one another, although the connection could also be disrupted, depending on the audience expectations and interests. To be sure, the author selected this tale in the first place because it relates a powerful political message, outlining how a worthy and virtuous ruler should govern. Numerous contemporary authors also composed similar texts, contributing to the significant genre of the “mirror of princes,” which was highly popular in the late Middle Ages.⁴⁰ But the moralization pursues a very different direction and achieves its own goal all by itself.

Intriguingly, there are more examples of tales addressing political issues pertaining to a ruler’s proper behavior. Tyranny, above all, emerges more than once as a danger to public welfare, such as in “Of ingratitude and the forgetting of benefits” (Tale 25), even though it is there only a narrative backdrop to a religious reflection. In essence, the author here relates the ancient account of a mighty ruler vying for the hand of an independent, apparently unmarried lady. She finds a champion who is willing to risk his life for her, who is identified as a pilgrim who has no erotic desires with her and only wants her to “keep his staff and bag in her bedchamber” in case of his death.⁴¹ She does so when he dies in the war, in which he actually managed to kill the opponent. However, as soon as three kings then woo for her hand, she removes both objects to avoid her disgrace. For the narrator, the first ruler represents the devil and the lady the human soul, while the pilgrim symbolizes Christ. But for our purpose it matters most that the hostile opponent is characterized as a tyrant who ruthlessly had laid waste to her country. Irrespective of the religious connotation, the author explicitly condemns the enemy for his brutal and unjust behavior. Although we know nothing about his actual intent, it is

³⁹ Stace, *Gesta Romanorum*, p. 47.

⁴⁰ *Global Medieval: Mirrors for Princes Reconsidered*, eds Regula Forster and Negin Yavari (Cambridge, MA: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2015); for a concise overview of the genre, see Cristian Bratu, ‘Mirror for Princes’, in *Handbook of Medieval Studies: Terms, Methods, Trends*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), vol. 2, pp. 1921-49.

⁴¹ Stace, *Gesta Romanorum*, p. 77.

clear as part of the narrative framework that he deserves to be condemned and that when he dies this is regarded with great relief.

Much later, in the tale “Of the innocent death of Christ” (Tale 134), we are told that a law was imposed that anyone who stripped the dead body of a knight off his armor should be put to death. This is happening, however, when a knight appears in a city that is besieged by a tyrannical king. While he is ready to defend them, he is lacking armor, so he defies the law, takes the armor of a knight who had died recently, and achieves the goal, liberating the city. Subsequently, he returns the armor to the grave; however, enemies relate what he had done to a judge, who begins to prosecute the knight. Although the hero defends himself vigorously, claiming that he “should be rewarded rather than be called to account,”⁴² providing the example of a house on fire that should be destroyed in order to save the city, the judge finds him guilty and he is put to death. Even though his execution is deeply mourned throughout the city, this does not bring him back to life. For the moralizing narrator, the city represents the world, the tyrannical king the devil, the brave knight Jesus Christ, the knight’s enemies as the Jews who betrayed Christ, and so we are supposed to understand the entire tale as a reflection of the Passion story. At the same time, turning to the actual narrative, we are confronted both by a tyrant and, separately from him, a law that can only be called unjust and a legal system that appears to be severely corrupted.

In the epimythion we learn once again of Christ’s life and suffering in most abbreviated form, and yet there is also a strong sense that the conditions for the knight are unfair and brutal, biased against him and subject to influence-peddling. Carrying out this selfless deed did not earn the knight the respect by the authorities that he deserved since his rivals were stronger in influencing the judge and because the latter simply ruled by the law without taking the circumstances into consideration. While for the narrator this exemplifies the problems with the world at large, we can take the story as a case in point targeting the political system which is upheld by laws that are arbitrary and senseless.

This provides a convenient segue for the moralization, and here we realize how much the narrative really serves to circumscribe Christ’s passion. Nevertheless, there is still a clear message warning the audience regarding the dangers of random laws that ultimately prove to be unjust and

⁴² Stace, *Gesta Romanorum*, p. 341.

subjugate innocent people. Undoubtedly, the knight had transgressed the law only with the purpose of helping the citizens, but his accomplishments immediately roused envy amongst his rivals, who then resorted to this arbitrary law in order to destroy him. The judge himself might not have to be criticized directly since he simply followed through with his assigned task, but the entire system proves to be corrupt, so the story itself invited the audience to reflect upon their own situation and their judges, laws, and rulers.

We would be wrong, however, to expect that the author of the *Gesta* would be prepared to criticize monarchy, the basic political concept in place during the Middle Ages. On the contrary, as we can see in “Of foresight and forethought” (Tale 74), if a people elects a king just for a year and then expels him, forcing him to go into miserable exile, then this is identified as utter foolishness and ignorance. The story, also based on an ancient tradition, ends, however, with an interesting twist in that the king, who is the center of attention, quickly realizes how wrong it would be for him to suffer for the rest of his life after having been removed from his office. In preparation for the time of his exile, he sends ahead provisions and thus has enough resources for the rest of his life even after he has lost his powerful position.

From a historical-political perspective, this account would not make much sense within the medieval context, but the moralization illuminates the true meaning. Whereas in other cases the semiotic bridge between the tale and the epimythion often proves to be almost flimsy, here we recognize a strong connection insofar as the king who gives his son a golden apple which he is supposed to hand over to the biggest fool he can find, is identified with God; the apple stands for the world, and the king who can rule only for one year for the everyman. The narrator thus meaningfully recommends to his audience: “while we are in the fullness of our powers in this life, let us send before us works of mercy, generous alms, and engage in prayer and fasting that after this life we may enter paradise.”⁴³ It was a rare occasion when a medieval king was impeached and removed from the throne, such as the English King Edward II, crowned in 1307 and dethroned in 1327, or King Wenceslas, ruler over the Holy Roman Empire, who was formally deposed in 1400 but then continued to

⁴³ Stace, *Gesta Romanorum*, p. 190.

rule as king of Bohemia until his death in 1419.⁴⁴ In practical terms, hence, for the medieval audience the situation presented here would not have made much sense; but in light of the religious reading, encouraging all listeners to prepare for their afterlife well before their death was most insightful and relevant.

Ethical and Spiritual Reflections

This is intriguingly matched by reflections on the differences between human and divine justice, as indicated in the tale “Of the devil’s cunning and the hidden judgements of God” (Tale 80), one of the most complex narratives in the entire *Gesta*. After a hermit has observed a man killing his shepherd for having lost his entire herd of sheep when he was asleep, he decides to leave his cell and live like all other people because he deeply questions God’s justice. But God sends one of His angels to accompany the hermit, and the two, while traveling toward a city, are welcomed and hosted in a most friendly fashion by a knight. To the hermit’s horror, however, the stranger kills the knight’s young child in the middle of the night. He knows that this is an angel, but he cannot understand his murderous action. The second night they are taken in by another generous person who owns a most valuable goblet, which the angel steals, again to the hermit’s complete confusion. Next, when they reach a bridge, the angel, while asking a poor man for directions, grabs him and throws him into the water, where he drowns. This convinces the hermit that this must be a devil in disguise.

To add to his deep consternation, the following night, when they try to find a place to stay, a rich but rude citizen denies them their request and allows them only to sleep in the pigsty. Strangely, the angel rewards him for this with the precious goblet, which represents the last straw for the hermit, who is now, full of anger, ready to abandon the angel as an evil creature. Only then does the latter provide him with the explanations, and everything suddenly proves to be very different from the way the hermit had perceived it. The generous knight, for instance, deserved to lose his child because he used to be a true Christian before and had turned into a greedy and grasping personality bent on making sure that his child would

⁴⁴ For work on this uncommon occurrence see, for instance, Kathryn Warner, *Edward II: The Unconventional King* (Stroud: Amberley, 2015); Jörg K. Hoensch, *Die Luxemburger: Eine spätmittelalterliche Dynastie gesamt-europäischer Bedeutung 1308-1437* (Stuttgart, Berlin, Cologne: Kohlhammer, 2000).

be rich in the future. As the angel points out: “now the knight has become a good Christian again, as he was before.”⁴⁵ All the other cases also find their religious justification, and the angel at the end admonishes him: “in future watch your tongue and do not slander God, for he knows all things.”⁴⁶ The hermit immediately begs him for forgiveness, returns to his cell, and never questions God’s justice again.

Here we see that, interestingly, the *Gesta* author directly drew inspiration from the second tale in eleventh-century Rabbi Nissim’s *An Elegant Composition Concerning Relief after Adversity*, although we cannot tell through what channels, since the original was composed in present-day Tunisia in Judeo-Arabic, whereas the *Gesta* was written in Latin.⁴⁷ Around 1400 the South-German poet Heinrich Kaufringer included a version of this tale in his collection, so we are certainly justified in identifying the *Gesta* as a most important literary intermediary, being a *Sammelbecken* and providing a wealth of literary sources for future writers.⁴⁸ Apart from this fascinating question regarding the connection between the Jewish and the Christian tradition manifested in this case, which still escapes our investigative analysis, this tale in the *Gesta* confirms once again the enormous importance of this collection of tales as

⁴⁵ Stace, *Gesta Romanorum*, p. 202.

⁴⁶ Stace, *Gesta Romanorum*, p. 202.

⁴⁷ Nissim ben Jacob ibn Shahin, *An Elegant Composition Concerning Relief after Adversity*, trans., introduction and notes by William M. Brinner (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1977). Here I draw from the new edition (Northvale, NJ, and London: Jason Aronson, 1996). The first one to observe this connection was Bernhard Heller, ‘Das hebräische und arabische Märchen’, in *Anmerkungen zu den Kinder- und Hausmärchen der Brüder Grimm*, eds Johannes Bolte and Georg Polivka, together with Elisabeth Kutzer and Bernhard Heller. Vol. 4 (Leipzig: Dieterich’sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1930), pp. 315-418. Not much new research has been published on this topic since then; Anke Kleine, ‘Der Gefährte im Paradies’: *Der guote Gêrhart* und die jüdische Überlieferung’, *Jiddistik-Mitteilungen* vol. 17 (1997), pp. 1-17, focuses on Rudolf von Ems’s romance and its Jewish source, mostly summarizing Heller’s and others’ insights. She does not, however, uncover any additional textual evidence regarding the transmission process.

⁴⁸ Heinrich Kaufringer, *Werke*, ed. Paul Sappeler, vols 1 and 2 (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1972); cf. also the excellent commentary for this and many other *mæren* in *Novellistik im Mittelalter: Märendichtung*, ed., trans., and commentary by Klaus Grubmüller (Frankfurt a. M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1996); for an impressive monograph study on Kaufringer, see Marga Stede, *Schreiben in der Krise: Die Texte des Heinrich Kaufringer* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 1993). Here I draw from the English translation by Albrecht Classen, *Love, Life, and Lust in Heinrich Kaufringer’s Verse Narratives* (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2014).

a mirror of religious, but then also political, philosophical, and spiritual concerns in the late Middle Ages.

Friendship and God

The theme of friendship also matters profoundly within the *Gesta*, as reflected especially in the tale “Of excessive love and loyalty, and how truth delivers us from death” (Tale 171). Although the title does not address friendship as such, the tale itself proves to be an exceedingly meaningful reflection on this topic. Two knights, one living in Egypt, the other in Babylon, develop a close friendship over the long distance without ever having seen each other. When the Babylonian finally visits the other, he immediately falls in love with a young woman in the friend’s household. He suffers so much from love sickness that the other notices it and then learns the truth. Although he himself had hoped to marry that woman eventually, which also would grant him huge wealth, he consents and allows his friend to marry her, whereupon the latter returns home full of happiness.

Soon thereafter the Egyptian loses all of his wealth and travels to Babylon hoping to receive help from his friend. The night before visiting him, however, he rests in a church and thus observes two men fighting outside, one of them killing the other. The murderer gets away, but there is outcry in the city, and the Egyptian, in his desperation over his poverty, volunteers and admits publicly to be the murderer. When he is led to the gallows, his friend recognizes him and immediately decides to rescue his friend by declaring himself the murderer. When both men are led to the gallows, the true murderer observes them and feels deep guilt, not willing to allow these two innocent men to be killed instead of himself. Driven by his remorse, he admits his guilt, which now amazes the crowd, so they take all three to the judge, who questions them about their motivations to confess their guilt. Astounded by the honesty and degree of friendship, the judge allows all three to go scot-free and tells them: “‘From henceforth strive to amend your life. Now go in peace’.”⁴⁹ This tale became the foundation for a long series of similar narratives and ballads, that is, a narrative tradition extending even to the early nineteenth century when Friedrich Schiller composed his famous ballad “Die Bürgschaft” (The

⁴⁹ Stace, *Gesta Romanorum*, p. 457.

Hostage).⁵⁰ For Schiller, the demonstration of true friendship can even overcome the evil mind of a dictator who at the end forgoes his own tyrannical rule and begs the two men to allow him to join their bond of friendship, whereas here in our case, which was probably the earliest version of this narrative motif, the judge only responds to this demonstration of true friendship with a Solomonic verdict, even forgiving the guilty man “because he told the truth.”⁵¹

Whereas the previous tale expounds political ideals, this one highlights primarily ethical concepts underlying true friendship which disregards the danger of death and gives freely to the friend. The moralization, however, takes a very different approach and identifies the judge, now identified as an emperor, as God Father, whereas the two knights are Jesus Christ and the first man, Adam. The beautiful young woman is called the human soul, and the two men fighting each other are defined as flesh and the spirit. Subsequently, the second knight is also interpreted as “the Apostles, who died for the name and the truth of Christ,”⁵² while the murderer then represents the human sinner. From a narratological and an ethical perspective, the tale itself clearly supersedes the epimythion, which appears as forced in its effort to correlate the concrete figures with religious ideas and concepts. Not surprisingly, many medieval and early modern poets hence responded to this tale and created their own versions because it provided them with considerable inspiration to explore the true meaning of homo-social friendship based on selflessness, absolute dedication, and the highest level of ethical behavior, placing the value of the friend’s life above the own.

Parallel to this tale in the *Gesta*, numerous other medieval and early modern narratives discussed the supreme value of friendship, following the tradition of *Amis et Amiloun*. In this regard, we can recognize in the *Gesta* version one of the significant contributions to this specific discourse which was to have a deep impact over hundreds of years until the

⁵⁰ Albrecht Classen, ‘Friendship—The Quest for a Human Ideal and Value. From Antiquity to the Early Modern Time’, in *Friendship in the Middle Ages*, eds Albrecht Classen and Marilyn Sandige (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), pp. 1-183. There is, of course, a vast amount of research on this classical author, which does not need to be cited here.

⁵¹ Stace, *Gesta Romanorum*, p. 457.

⁵² Stace, *Gesta Romanorum*, p. 458.

present time.⁵³ In the competition between the tale proper and the moralization, the former seems to have achieved a much stronger impact both because of the skillful narrative structure and the ethical foundation for the theme of friendship. Insofar as we could identify the quality of a literary text drawing on the criterion whether it was open to different audience interests and allowed a variety of readings, we can firmly assert that the *Gesta* as a collective belonged to some of the most important texts from that time, irrespective of many internal disharmonies, tensions between the main text and its moralization, and sometimes confusion in the narrative structure.

Spiritual and Legal Aspects

In a way, the author of the *Gesta* paid attention to a wide range of themes and topics discussed at his time, and translated them into literary narratives in order to have the necessary material for his moralization. This last point, however, does not diminish the importance of the tales themselves in which we observe mirrored the common concerns, ideals, values, fears, and issues prevalent in late medieval society. Many times we hear of ethical and moral motifs, but then there are also cases pertaining to the practice of law, such as in “Of the obdurate, who refuse to be converted and their punishment through their appointed judgement” (Tale 117). Here the premise consists of the law which Emperor Frederick (I?) issued regarding the case of rape, that is, that the man who rescued a rape victim would have the right to marry her.⁵⁴ In the tale, a knight indeed rescues a rape victim from her ravisher, and she pledges to marry him after his return, but in the meantime the rapist arrives at the castle and promises her to take her as his wife, which she accepts. Later, her original rescuer is rebuffed by her, so he calls upon a judge, asking for justice. Neither the other knight nor the maid know how to defend themselves, so both are hanged, of which the public fully approves.

⁵³ Unfortunately, Stace in his translation (see note 13) does not offer any comments on this highly important aspect pertaining to this tale. But we can rely on Oesterley’s old edition for a good outline of the long narrative tradition.

⁵⁴ This issue surfaces more often in medieval literature than we might commonly assume; see Albrecht Classen, *Sexual Violence and Rape in the Middle Ages: A Critical Discourse in Premodern German and European Literature* (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2011); Suzanne M. Edwards, *The Afterlives of Rape in Medieval English Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

As usual, the moralization offers a simple solution, equating the emperor who issued the law with God, the rape victim with the human soul, the hostile knight with the devil, and the other knight fighting for the maid with Christ. Even though the soul is liberated by Christ, it remains subject to the devil's seductions, that is, the world's vanity (297). Considering the terrible outcome of the tale, the author can only conclude: "But wretched man does not fear the Lord enough to open his heart, and on the Day of Judgement the Heavenly Judge will pass sentence against such."⁵⁵ Both the tale itself and the epimythion prove to be valuable as textual documents reflecting the history of mentality, addressing the common occurrence of the crime of rape, the government's effort to prevent it through harsh laws and judgments, but then also people's general weakness, rather following the low road of physical pleasures and immediate gratification than the high road of spiritual and ethical ideals.

According to the tale, even laws do not support women enough to protect themselves against the crime of rape, but once the maid has been liberated at a high cost—her defending champion receives many serious wounds—she only pretends to join hands with him in marriage: "I wish it with all my heart, and I give you my pledge that I will".⁵⁶ More correctly, she is simply too weak to hold up her part of the agreement between them, and she quickly falls for the rapist who promises her marriage and other things. However, the judge at the end emerges as a rational, unbiased, and decisive person who understands the law well and applies it in all necessary strictness, "and everyone commended the judge for pronouncing such a sentence."⁵⁷

In the combination of tale with moralization we are in an ideal situation to grasp well what the author, and subsequently also his audience, was concerned with: issues of physical violence of a sexual nature, the role of the law, the function of those who come to the rescue of innocent victims, and the degree of betrayal by the maid who marries the rapist after all. In the court proceedings, all conditions are clearly spelled out, and the culprits have nothing to say in their defense, and hence deserve the death penalty. Altogether, the author intricately interweaves the legal with the

⁵⁵ Stace, *Gesta Romanorum*, p. 297.

⁵⁶ Stace, *Gesta Romanorum*, p. 295.

⁵⁷ Stace, *Gesta Romanorum*, p. 297.

religious discourse and illustrates the political and judicial conflict through the explanations in the subsequent discussion.

Entertainment and Instruction

But there is also a considerable degree of entertainment contained in the *Gesta*, so when some of the stories closely follow traditional models developed by the authors of Old French *fabliaux*, such as in “Of adulterous women and the blindness of prelates” (Tale 122). The story itself proves to be rather simple, with a knight (or rather farmer) going to work in his vineyard, while his wife has sent for her lover. Since the knight has hurt one of his eyes, he comes back home, which terrifies his wife. But as is usual in this genre, after having hid her lover she pretends to treat her husband’s healthy eye, “‘in case you lose that one as well through contact with the diseased one’.”⁵⁸ This allows her to wave secretly to her lover who can thus sneak away without being seen by the foolish farmer. Through her trickery she manages to keep her love affair a secret, and in that process exposes the husband’s foolishness, whom she comforts finally by saying: “‘Now I am sure your sound eye will come to no harm’.”⁵⁹ Indeed, insofar as the lover is gone by then, the poor man will not catch any sight of the evil affair and can thus rest in bed without any concerns.

The tale itself pursues the same narrative strategy as many other similar cases, and thus invites the audience to laugh about the knight who does not understand at all how easily he has been duped, never even suspecting his wife of committing adultery behind his back. However, the moralization in this case addresses prelates of the church who are blinded by gifts, hence corruption, while the wife represents the soul that deceives the authorities. As the author realizes only too well, people tend to be too weak to live up to their own religious ideals because they are easily seduced by worldly pleasures: “often the eye that is sound ... is so clouded through carnal affections and worldly blandishments through worldly vanities and desires of the flesh, that the prelate will not be able to see the perils that face him and his charges, and to correct them with penance.”⁶⁰ The criticism is directly aimed at the higher ranks of ecclesiastics who allow members of their parish to bribe them, but it also targets ordinary

⁵⁸ Stace, *Gesta Romanorum*, p. 314.

⁵⁹ Stace, *Gesta Romanorum*, p. 314.

⁶⁰ Stace, *Gesta Romanorum*, p. 315.

people who would rather embrace the pleasures of the flesh than their spiritual values. Even though the author seriously appeals to his audience: “Let each of us therefore so direct his spiritual eye towards God that he will be able to remove every veil of sin,”⁶¹ the tale itself invites the audience to laugh about the foolish knight and the clever wife.⁶²

Conclusion

In the narrow space of this article we have not at all covered the wide range of themes or narrative strategies involved in the *Gesta*. But there is no doubt that the collection as a whole represents a significant foundation for all of late medieval and early modern literature. As we can observe in “Of gluttony and drunkenness” (Tale 179), for instance, the author investigates one of the seven deadly sins and illustrates the consequences of those two human weaknesses. Not only does he refer to the famous Cistercian author of the *Dialogus miraculorum* (ca. 1240), Caesarius of Heisterbach, as his source, in the actual tale he cites the Old Testament numerous times, then the Greek Bishop Basil of Caesarea (d. 379), the Roman philosopher Boethius (d. 525) and also the Roman poet Ovid (d. 17 C.E.), all with the purpose of building a case in his effort to fight the evil of drunkenness. In this way he does not only manage to convey his message, but he also demonstrates the true extent of his advanced education.

Despite the prevalent narrative structure throughout the *Gesta*, almost each tale invites an individual reading, operating with different source material and narrative strategies. We thus face a most intriguing opportunity with this anthology of tales to gain deep insights into late medieval everyday culture as reflected by a religious author who obviously drew from a wide range of sources. Thus, this literary *Sammelbecken* is an extraordinary document of ordinary life, for in it we recognize the teachings of the Church, the interactions of the various cultural and religious traditions, and, of fundamental concern for most medieval literature, an entertaining medium for spiritual reflection.

⁶¹ Stace, *Gesta Romanorum*, p. 315.

⁶² Philippa Bright, ‘Anglo-Latin Collections of the *Gesta Romanorum* and Their Role in the Cure of Souls’, in *What Nature Does Not Teach: Didactic Literature in the Medieval and Early Modern Period*, ed. Juanita Feros Ruys (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), pp. 401-24.